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Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 4 TUNIS 0372

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: ELAB, PGOV, TS
SUBJECT: UGTT-GOT CONFRONTATION, UPDATE AND ANALYSIS

REF: TUNIS 0204

1. SUMMARY. THE TUNISIAN DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION HAS MATURED TO THE EXTENT THAT SOME CONCLUSIONS CAN BE DRAWN AS TO WHAT HAS HAPPENED AND THE REASONS. ESSENTIALLY THE DISPUTE IS OVER WHO AND WHAT INSTITUTIONS WILL CONTROL TUNISIA IN THE POST-BOURGUIBA PERIOD. DURING THE PAST THREE WEEKS THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE CONTENDING FORCES HAS COME INTO SHARPER FOCUS AND THE BATTLE LINES HAVE BECOME MORE CLEARLY DELINEATED. BOTH CAMPS NOW SEEM TO HAVE RETREATED FROM THEIR INITIAL EMOTIONAL EXCESSES AND TO BE TAKING STOCK. BOTH CAMPS
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ALSO SEEM UNSURE ABOUT THEIR TIMING AND TACTICS, AND THERE ARE INDICATIONS OF DISAGREEMTN WITHIN EACH GROUP AS TO WHICH STEPS SHOULD BE TAKEN NEXT. IT IS STILL VERY MUCH AN OPEN BALL GAME, AS BOTH THE POSSIBILITIES OF A COMPROMISE AND OF A VIOLENT CLASH EXIST. OUR BASIC EVALUATION IS THAT THIS CONFRONTATION, AS OTHERS IN THE PAST, WILL NOT RESULT IN AN IMMEDIATE OR DRASTIC CHANGE

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IN THE TUNISIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM, NOR WILL IT DEGENERATE INTO A PERIOD OF VIOLENT ACTION AND REACTION. RATHER, WE THINK, THIS CONFRONTATION COULD PROVE TO BE AN IMPORTANT STEP IN A PROCESS TOWARD THE APPEARANCE OF NEW POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE TUNISIAN SCENE. END SUMMARY.

2. WHAT HAPPENED. THE EVENTS OF THE PAST THREE WEEKS HAVE BEEN MARKED BY TWO SIGNIFICANT HAPPENINGS. THE FIRST WAS THE FIRING OF INTERIOR MINISTER TAHAR BELKHODJA AND HIS CLOSE ASSOCIATE AHMED BENNOUR, THE NUMBER TWO IN THE DEFENSE MINISTRY. A NUMBER OF OTHER MINISTERS AND SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WERE ALOS FIRED OR RESIGNED, AND THEY ALL HAVE BEEN REPLACED BY MEN CONSIDERED LOYAL TO PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA AND HIS CLOSES ALLIES. THIS LATTER GROUP INCLUDES DEFENSE MINISTER FARHAT, PARTY DIRECTOR SAYAH AND THE RPESIDENT'S SON, HABIB BOURGUIBA, JR. WHO HAS REEMERGED (PROBABLY UNWILLINGLY) AS A CONSERVATIVE FORCE IN TUNISIAN POLITICS AFTER SIX YEARS OF SEMI-RETIREMENT. THE SECOND IMPORTANT EVENT WAS THE RESIGNATION OF UGTT SECRETARY GENERAL HABIB ACHOUR FROM THE PARTY'S POLITICAL BUREAU AND CENTRAL COMMITTEE. (THIS HAS NOW BEEN FOLLOWED BY THE RESIGNATION OF KHEREDDINE SALHI, ONE OF THE OTHER TWO UGTT MEMBERS ON THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE.) THESE RESIGNATIONS TOOK PLACE SHORTLY AFTER THE CLOSE OF THE UGTT NATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING, WHICH ISSUED A STRONG DENUNCIATION OF CONFIDENTIAL

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THE GOVERNMENT'S DOMESTIC POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICIES, AND OF THE GOVERNMENT'S THREE KEY FIGURES, NOUIRA, FARHAT AND SAYAH.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE EVENTS. THE LONG-RANGE IMPORT OF THESE EVENTS IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT JUST YET. MUCH WILL DEPEND ON THE DEGREE OF CAUTION AND DELIBERATION EXERCISED BY BOTH SIDES. MUCH WILL ALSO DEPEND ON THE DEGREE OF DISCIPLINE AND LOYALTY WHICH THE LEADERS OF THE TWO CAMPS CAN OBTAIN FROM THEIR CADRES AND THOSE FORCES WHICH MIGHT JOIN THEM.

4. THE IMMEDIATE RESULT, HOWEVER, IS THAT MUCH CLEARER BATTLE LINES HAVE BEEN DRAWN, AND THAT THE RIVALRY BETWEEN THE PSD AND THE UGTT IS NOW MORE FULLY IN THE OPEN. THE UGTT HAS MOVED IN DIRECTION OF CHALLENGING PARTY'S TRADITIONAL ROLE AS THE SOLE LEGITIMATE POLITICAL INSTITUTION IN TUNISIA. THE NOUIRA GOVERNMENT, BY CLEARING THE CABINE OF REAL OR SUSPECTED UNRELIABLE ELEMENTS, HAS STRENGTHENED ITS HAND. AS YET NEITHER SIDE HAS TAKEN THE FINAL STEP OF OPENING FULL HOSTILITIES. BOTH ARE ASSESSING THEIR OPTIONS. THE UGTT HAS NOT

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PLACED ITSELF IN OPPOSITION TO THE EXISTING CONSTITU-
TIONAL SYSTEM, AND OFFICIALLY IT IS STILL LOYAL TO
PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA. FOR ITS PART, THE GOVERNMENT HAS
NOT DIRECTLY ATTACKED THE UGTT AS AN INSTITUTION.
EXCLUDING THE EXCESSES OF SOME PARTY OFFICIALS AND
PRO-REGIME MEDIA, IT HAS CONCENTRATED ITS COUNTER-ATTACK
ON "OUTSIDE SUBVERSIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENTS" WHICH
HAVE WORKED THEIR WAY INTO POSITIONS OF INFLUCENCE WITHIN
THE ORGANIZATION, DIVERTING THE UGTT FROM ITS LEGITIMATE
ROLE OF DEFENDING AND ADVANCING WORKER'S INTERESTS.
THIS RESTRAINT, ALBEIT LIMITED, MAY NOT BE ACCIDENTAL.
WE BELIEVE THAT BOTH SIDES SHARE THE VIEW THAT THE
POSSIBILITY OF SOME SORT OF MODUS VIVENDI STILL EXISTS.

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5. IN THIS CORNER, THE UGTT. THE UGTT, CONTRARY TO
SOME EXPECTATIONS, DID NOT END ITS NATIONAL COUNCIL
MEETING BY CALLING FOR A TOTAL BREAK WITH THE PSD OR
THE CREATION OF A NEW LABOR PARTY. IT SEEMS, HOWEVER,
TO BE MOVING IN THIS DIRECTION. THE NATIONAL COUNCIL'S
FINAL COMMUNIQUE LISTED NUMEROUS CRITICISMS OF THE
GOVERNMENT'S DOMESTIC POLICIES, AND STATED ITS OWN IDEAS
FOR CURING TUNISIA'S ILLS. MANY OF THESE SOCIALIST-
INSPIRED PROGRAMS ARE CONTRADICTORY, ECONOMICALLY

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UNSOUND AND DOGMATIC. THE COUNCIL DEMANDED "TRULY DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS," AND CALLED FOR THE ORGANIZATION OF YOUTH GROUPS, A PRESS AGENCY, A DAILY NEWSPAPER AND THE LIKE. IT ALSO VOICED WILLIGNESSS TO ACCEPT THE SUPPORT OF LIKE-MINDED "DEMOCRATIC FORCES" WANTING TO WORK FOR THE CREATION OF A NEW AND BETTER SOCIETY. THIS APPEAL FOR ALLIES WAS DIRECTED NOT JUST TO THE PUBLIC
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BUT, MORE PROINTEDLY, TO THOSE GROUPS WHICH ALREADY EXIST AND ARE IN VARIOUS STAGES OF OPPOSITION TO THE PSD, THE SOCIAL-DEMOCRATS (EX-LIBERALS), THE BEN SALAHISTS AND THE COMMUNISTS. INITIAL REACTIONS INDICATE THAT THIS INVITATION WILLNOT BE TURNED DOWN. THE NATIONAL COUNCIL BACKED AWAY, HOWEVER, FROM UGTT'S EARLIER EXPRESSION OF AGREEMENT WITH LIBYA IN SUPPORT OF REJECTION FRONT. PERHAPS REALIZING IT HAD GONE TOO FAR WITH JOINT COMMUNIQUE SIGNED IN LIBYA DEC 26, IT CECLARED FULL AGREEMENT WITH ALL GOT FOREIGN POLICIES.

6. TEH UGTT'S LEADER HABIB ACHOUR: IT IS SAID THAT THERE WAS A STRONG MOVEMENT IN THE NATIONAL COUNCIL, HEADED BY THE YOUNGER, MORE MILITANT RADICAL WING OF THE UGTT, TO CALL FOR AN EN BLOC BREAK WITH THE PARTY AND FOR THE IMMIEDIATE CREATION OF A NEW LABOR PARTY. ACCORGING TO REALIABLE REPORTS, ACHOUR OPPOSED THIS AS PREMATURE, OBTAINING AGREEMENT TO POSTPONE THESE ACTIONS UNTIL THE ATTITUDES OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THE PARTY COULD BE BETTER DISCERNED. ON THIS POINT HE WAS SUPPORTED BY HIS OLD TIME UGTT FAITHFUL AND BY A "CENTER PROGRESSIVE GROUP" WHICH FEELS UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE MORE POLITICIZED RADICAL LEFT. THIS LATTER MINORITY, WELL-ORGANIZED AND FORECEFUL, EMERGED STRONGER THAN HAD BEEN EXPECTED AND VIRTUALLY CONTROLLED THE MEETING.

7. WE HAVE REPORTED ON ACHOUR'S DILEMMA, THAT OF HEADING THE UGTT'S ATTACK ON THE PARTY WHILE AT THE SAME TIME NOT BEING IN FULL CONTROL OF THAT ATTACK. ACHOUR HAS NOT HESITATED TO MAKE LIFE DIFFICULT FOR THE GOVERNMENT DURING THE PAST FEW MONTHS. HE AND THE UGTT WERE OBVIOUSLY HEADING FOR CONFRONTATION WITH THE GOVERNMENT AND PARTY. HIS REASONS FOR LEADING THIS ATTACK WERE PERSONAL AS WELL
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AS POLITICAL. AT NO TIME, WE BELIEVE, DID HE INTEND TO MAKE A TOTAL BREAK WITH THE CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM. THE

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RADICAL-LEFT FACTION, WHICH SEEKS A CLEAN BREAK, ALSO
VIEWS ACHOUR AS MUCH A PART OF THE ESTABLISHMENT AS
NOUIRA, AND THEY HAD BECOME INCREASINGLY CRITICAL OF
ACHOUR'S CONTINUED AND CONTRADICTORY MEMBERSHIP IN THE
POLITICAL BUREAU AND THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE. ACHOUR
PROBABLY RECOGNIZED THIS LILEMMA AND SOUGHT TO RESOLVE
IT PARTIALLY BY COMPROMISE AND STRADDLING. HE RECALLED
THE PARTY'S PAST ACHIEVEMENTS BUT CRITICIZED IT FOR
WHAT IT HAD BECOME. HE REFUSED THE OPPORTUNITY OF
CALLING FOR UGTT MEMBERSHIP TO QUIT THE PSD EN BLOC BUT
SAID EVERYONE IS FREE TO MAKE HIS OWN CHOICE. HE RESIGNED
HIS OFFICES IN THE PARTY AS A DEMONSTRATION OF HIS OWN
INDEPENDENCE, BUT DID NOT RESIGN FROM THE PARTY ITSELF
OR CALL FOR THE CREATION OF A LABOR PARTY. IN SHORT,
ACHOUR NEITHER LED THE NATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING, NOR WAS
HE A CAPTIVE OF IT. THE TRUTH IS PROBABLY SOMEWHERE
IN BETWEEN, AS HE APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN REACTING TO
AS MUCH AS CREATING, NEW EVENTS AND "NEW REALITIES."

7. MANY OF ACHOUR'S PRESENT DIFFICULTIES STEM FROM HIS
PERSONAL AMBITION AND HIS BITTERNESS OVER PAST WRONGS.
HE ALSO TENDS NOT TO THINK HIS ACTIONS OUT FULLY, OFTEN
HAVING TO EAT CROW AFTERWARDS. HIS DEALINGS WITH QADHAFI
AND MASMOUDI HAVE NOT BEEN POPULAR IN THE UNION, AND THE
RECENT MESS HE MADE FOR HIMSELF --BOTH IN TUNISIA AND
ABROAD -- OVER THE DEC 26 JOINT COMMUNIQUE ASSOCIATING
THE UGTT WITH THE REJECTION FRONT HAS MADE HIM LOOK FOOLISH
OR WORSE. OTHER PROBLEMS HAVE ARISIN, HOWEVER, WHICH ARE
NOT OF HIS MAKING. ONE OF THESE STEMS FROM THE GENERATION
AND PERCEPTION GAP WITHIN THE UGTT. THE RESULT HAS BEEN
THE EMERGENCE OF SERIOUS DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE AGING
ACHOUR AND THE YOUNGER MEMBERS, MORE INFLUENCED BY
RADICAL NEW PHILOSOPHIES THAN BY OLD SLOGANS AND APPROACHES. ACHOUR
SEEMS NEVERTHELESS TO BE FAIRLY SECURE
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AS HEAD OF THE UGTT, WITH THE MAJORITY OF THE UNION, AT
LEAST FOR THE MOMENT, BEHIND HIM. WHETHER HE WILL BE
ABLE TO CONTROL EVENTS OVER THE LONG RUN IS ANOTHER
QUESTION. HE HAS LITTLE LATITUDE NOW BUT TO REMAIN WITH
THE UGTT. THE REGIME WOULD NOT TOLERATE HIS ACTIONS FOR
A DAY IF HE DID NOT HAVE THE STRENGTH OF UGTT MASSES
BEHIND HIM. THIS IS HIS DEFENSE AND HE CANNOT AFFORD
TO LOSE IT.

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8. NOUIRA AND ACHOUR ARE ABOUT THE SAME AGE AND HAVE WORKED TOGETHER UNDER BOURBUIBA FOR DECADES. NOUIRA IS CAUTHT IN A QUANDARY NOT UNLIKE ACHOUR'S. HIS CONTROL OVER THE MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT AND ITS ABILITY TO RESPOND IS NOW ENHANCED AFTER BOURGUIBA'S ACQUIESCENCE TO NOUIRA'S DEMANDS THAT BELKHODJA BE REMOVED FROM THE CABINET. HE ALSO SEEMS RELUCTANT TO TAKE ANY ACTIONS WHICH MIGHT FURTHER DIVIDE THE COUNTRY AND BRING INTO DOUBT HIS CAPACITY TO PRESERVE THE SYSTEM BOURGUIBA HAS FORGED.

9. WITH BELKHODJA'S REMOVAL NOUIRA HAS RID HIMSELF OF HIS MAJOR RIVAL. WHILE ALL THE CIRCUMSTANCES INVOLVING BELKHODJA'S REMOVAL ARE STILL UNCLEAR, THE STORY OF "JUSTIFIED CAUSE" INVOLVING SOME KIND OF ACCORD AMONG HIM, BENNOUR, AND ACHOUR IS GAINING CURRENCY HERE. IT IS ALSO WIDELY HINTED THAT THERE WAS A "LIBYAN CONNECTION."
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NO EVIDENCE HAS BEEN PRESENTED AS YET, NOR HAS NOUIRA MADE SUCH CHARGES PUBLICLY. IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE, HOWEVER, THAT THERE WAS SOME SORT OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN HIM AND ACHOUR AS TO STAGING CONDITIONS LEADING TO NOUIRA'S DISCREDIT AND EVENTUAL DOWNFALL. WE KNOW

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THAT BELKHODJA HAD PRIVATELY SUGGESTED (NOT TO US) HIS READINESS TO ACCEPT THE CALL TO REPLACE NOUIRA, AND HIS AMBITIONS CLEARLY WENT FAR BEYOND THE MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR. BENNOUR WAS KNOWN TO BE CLOSE TO BELKHODJA AND TO DISLIKE FARHAT WHOSE POST SUPPOSEDLY HE COVETED. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT QADHAFI, THROUGH MASMOUDI, MAY HAVE BEEN ASSOSICATED WITH THESE MANEUVERS OR EVEN BANKROLLED THEM. BELKHODJA AND MASMOUDI GREW UP IN THE SAME TOWN AND REPORTEDLY THEY HAVE MAINTAINED CONTACT DURING MASMOUDI'S EXILE. THERE IS ALSO THE STORY THAT THEY SAW EACH OTHER RECENTLY IN MAHDIA, WHERE THEY BOTH MAINTAIN RESIDENCES. BOURGUIBA, JR. HAS TOLD US OF A "PLOT" ALONG THESE LINES BUT HAS NOT GONE INTO DETAILS, SAYING THAT THE DOCUMENTED EVIDENCE IS CONCLUSIVE. OVER THIS PAST WEEKEND HE HAS ALSO MADE SIMILAR REFERENCES PUBLICLY AT PSD MEETINGS, AGAIN WITHOUT SPECIFICS. WITH RESPECT TO UNNAMED UGTT OFFICIALS IN LEAGUE WITH LIBYA, HE HAS ALSO INDICATED PUBLICLY THAT TRIALS MIGHT TAKE PLACE. WE SHALL DOUBTLESSLY HEAR MORE ABOUT THIS IN THE FUTURE. SERIOUS REPERCUSSIONS ON TUNISIA'S WARMING RELATIONS WITH LIBYA ARE ENTAILED.

10. FOR THE PRESENT NOUIRA'S CONTROL OVER THE GOVERN-MENT SEEMS CLEARLY ENHANCED, BUT HE FACES THE QUESTIONS OF HOW TO USE THIS IMPROVED POSITION. HE HAS ALWAYS CALLED FOR COMPROMISE AND DIALOGUE TO RESOLVE DOMESTIC CONFLICTS. THE SOCIAL PACT SIGNED WITH ACHOUR IN JANUARY OF 1977 IS AN EXAMPLE OF THIS PHILOSOPHY PUT CONFIDENTIAL

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INTO PRACTICE, AS ARE THE RECENT SETTLEMENTS WITH STRIKING RAILROAD AND MINE WORKERS. UP TO THIS MOMENT, NOUIRA'S PUBLIC REACTIONS TO ACHOUR'S AND THE UGTT'S CHALLENGE HAS BEEN "STATESMANLIKE." HE HAS EXPRESSED "REGRET" OVER ACHOUR'S DECISION TO RESIGN FROM HIS PARTY OFFICES, BUT ADDS THAT IN TUNISIA THE INDIVIDUAL IS FREE TO DO AS HE CHOOSES. IN PARIS RADIO INTERVIEW LAST WEEK, HE EVEN SAID THAT "IF THE UGTT WANTS TO FORM A PARTY, ALL THEY HAVE TO DO IS DECLARE IT." HE FURTHER STATED THAT IT WAS NORMAL THAT DIFFERENCES EXIST BETWEEN THE UGTT AND THE GOVERNMENT, "AS THE GOVERNMENT DEFENDS THE GENERAL INTERESTS OF THE COUNTRY AND THE UGTT DEFENDS SPECIFIC INTERESTS." IT IS NORMAL, HE SAID, THAT THERE ARE DIFFERENCES AND HE CITED THE EXISTENCE OF STRIKES INTUNISIA AS AN EXAMPLE OF "THE POEPLE'S FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION." RETURNING FROM PARIS ON JAN 10, HE ALSO STATED THAT TALK OF A "POLITICAL CRISIS IN TUNISIA" IS EXAGGERATED.

11. 11. WHILE NOUIRA WISHES TO AVOID AN OPEN CLASH, HE

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CANNOT ALLOW THE SYSTEM AND STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT TOO
BE DISMANTLED WITHOUT A FIGHT. IN A PARIS PRESS
CONFERENCE JAN 10 AND SUBSEQUENT PUBLIC STATEMENTS
NOUIRA MADE IT CLEAR THAT WHILE DIFFERENCES CAN EXIST,
"ONE CANNOT CONFUSE LIBERALISM WITH ANARCHY." HIS
GOVERNMENT CANNOT ACCEPT THE DESTABILIZATION OF SOCIETY.
HE HAS THE FORCE TO CARRY OUT THIS POLICY, INCLUDING A
DEPENDABLE POLICE AND A RELIABLE ARMY, BOTH UNDER MEN
UPON WHOM HE CAN RELY.

12M CONCLUSION. SOME OF NOUIRA'S CLOSEST ASSOCIATES
APPEAR TO BE URGING HIM TO TAKE STRONGER ACTIONS THAN
HE HAS YET BEEN WILLING TO DO. WE BELIEVE HE MAY FOLLOW
THEIR ADVICE ONLY IF HE IS PRESENTED WITH NO ALTERNATIVE.
THIS WILL DEPEND ON WHAT THE UGTT DOES BETWEEN NOW AND
THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE PARTY CENTRAL COMMITTEE
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SCHDDULED FOR JAN 20. THERE IS TALK OF THE REGIME'S
GIVING SUPPORT TO THE FORMATION OF A NEW LABOR ORGANIZATION.
THE "FORCE OUVRIERE TUNISENNE", AS RIVAL TO THE UGTT.
WE HEAR FROM THE UGTT THAT IT WOULD WELCOME JUST SUCH
A TEST, "A FREE ELECTION" AS ACHOUR'S SONE TERMS IT.

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13. WHATEVER MIGHT BE THE SHORT TERM RESULTS, TUNISIA SEEMS TO BE MOVING, FITFULLY AND UNSURELY, AWAY FROM THE PSD'S TRADITIONAL DOMINATION OF TUNISIAN POLITICS AND TOWARDS THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A BI-PARTY, IF NOT MULTI-PARTY, SYSTEM IN THE POST-BOURGUIBA PERIOD. IN A SENSE, TUNISIA HAS ALREADY ENTERED THIS PERIOD, EVEN THOUGH BOURGUIBA IS STILL ALOVE. NOTHING HAS BEEN HEARD FROM HIM ON THIS MOT IMPORTANT DOMESTIC CRISIS TO CONFRONT TUNISIA SINCE THE JERBA UNITY DECLARATION FIASCO IN 1974. IT IS PROBABLE, HOWEVER, THAT THE PRESIDENT WILL AT SOME POINT COME OUT IN STRONG DEFENSE OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM HE HAS PUT TOGETHER OVER THE PAST FORTY YEARS. WE DOUBT, HOWEVER, THAT HE WILL BE ABLE TO TURN THE TIDE OF NEW POLITICAL FORCES RISING IN OPPOSITION TO THE PSD AND ITS OLD WAYS OF DOING THINGS
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